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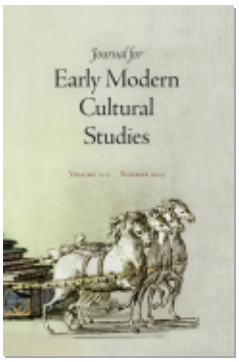

Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies, Volume 14, Number 3, Summer 2014, pp. 31-54 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/jem.2014.0033*

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ABSTRACT

"Wax Magic and The Duchess of Malfi*" argues that wax magic provides the best way to understand how the Duchess is affected by the presentation of the wax corpses representing her husband and children as a kind of torturous spectacle. The article reads John Webster's play alongside historical accounts of wax magic, especially the 1578 attack on Queen Elizabeth. While Ferdinand's attack on his sister is not intended as a magical attack, wax magic proves a powerful conceptual model for how art can impact the early modern subject through sympathetic identifications that trouble the boundaries between subjects and objects. Ultimately, the essay argues that both the success of Ferdinand's spectacle and the power of theater itself can be better understood through the possibilities of wax magic.*

In 1578, three wax figures representing Elizabeth and her councilors were found buried in a stable outside of London. These figures were seen as the means to launch a magical attack on the queen's person, and they provoked an outcry at court. Bernardino de Mendoza, the Spanish Ambassador in England, described the event in a letter sent back to Spain:

> A very curious thing has happened here lately. A countryman has found, buried in a stable, three wax figures, two spans high and proportionately broad; the centre figure had the word Elizabeth written the forehead and the side figures were dressed like her councillors [*sic*], and were covered over with a great variety of different signs, the left side of the images being transfixed with a large quantity of pig's bristles as if it were some sort of

> witchcraft. When it reached the queen's ears she was disturbed, as it was looked upon as an augury, and great inquiries have been set on foot about it, although hitherto nothing has been discovered. (de Mendoza 611)

From the details de Mendoza relays, we can begin to understand how this attack on the queen's person was intended to work: the figures were supposed to not only represent the queen and her councilors, but also work harm on them as we can deduce from both the "large quantity of pig's bristles" stuck in the images and de Mendoza's suggestion that the figures may have been intended as "some sort of witchcraft." While he does not specify the "sort of witchcraft" under consideration, it must have been a form of sympathetic magic since he suggests that its efficacy depends on likenesses and affinities between objects and subjects.

Sympathetic magic includes any magical act that uses an object to impact a subject across a distance on the basis of shared qualities or characteristics. Underlying the practice of sympathetic magic is a belief in a certain neo-Platonic oneness of the universe that transcends any particularity.[1] At the same time, for such an act to be effective, a practitioner of sympathetic magic must be able to differentiate the attack so that a particular object effects a particular subject, and various kinds of sympathetic magic use various strategies of differentiation. Thus sympathetic magic encompasses a wide range of practices, from the seventeenth-century use of sympathy powders to cure wounds by treating the responsible weapons, to various kinds of image magic that use visual images to manipulate a subject.[2] The attack on the queen belongs, at least in part, to this latter class of sympathetic magic since the artful figures connect to the political figures through a likeness of forms. De Mendoza's account does not comment on the verisimilitude of the representations; yet from the details he does provide we can surmise that their crafter attempted to depict the queen and her councilors with some degree of accuracy. He mentions the proportionality of the figures together with details about their costuming, arrangement, and inscription. These details suggest that the artful figures represented the political persons in every register that the crafter could mobilize. At stake in these practices of representation is the efficacy of the magic itself. If the figures do not adequately represent their targets, they will fail to work on them, and in this case fail to harm them.

While not all magic (or all image magic) is necessarily ill-intentioned, several details of de Mendoza's account make it clear that this event should be understood as an attack, including most obviously de Mendoza's naming the act "some sort of witchcraft." Magic was understood as witchcraft in the period

when used to bring about harm or attached to diabolical practices, as seems true here.[3] The pig's bristles that pierce the figures suggest the hoped for outcome of the magic: a physical, psychological, or spiritual wounding of the queen and her councilors. Their placement on the left side of the figures suggests an alliance with the devil, since the left connotes sinister possibilities.[4] Certainly, the reaction of the court confirms de Mendoza's understanding of the attack as transgressive. It "disturbed" the queen and set in motion "great inquiries." Even for skeptics of magic and witchcraft, such as Reginald Scot, the intent behind the attack was sufficient for alarm. He recounts the same incident in his 1584 *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, a tract that reveals both his fascination with and mistrust of witchcraft, declaring, "such mischeefous pretenses . . . though they never can or doo take effect, the practisers [should] be punished with all extremitie: bicause therein is manifested a traiterous heart to the Queene, and a presumption against God" (474–75). While Scot dismisses the figures as inefficacious, insisting that the intended results "never can or doo take effect," the figures still offer proof for him of "a traitorous heart," and thus their creators should be punished with "all extremitie" as a result. Indeed, during Elizabeth's reign, several Parliamentary Acts defined treason to include demonstrations of ill will towards the monarch, presumably because such demonstrations were always politically harmful regardless of whether they had any further power to cause harm.[5]

Together the categories of witchcraft and image magic go far in explaining the nature of the attack on the queen. Yet labeling the attack as image magic or as witchcraft obscures some of the levels on which it may have worked by minimizing the importance of materiality. I would argue that in the attack on the queen, the choice of wax as sculptural material is as important as the way the figures represent her image because wax was used throughout the period as a philosophical model and literary metaphor that figured the heart and mind, and particularly the female heart and mind. Thus wax connects metaphorically to what it means to be human, and female, in ways that other materials do not. By forming the figures in wax, the crafter may have been forging or attempting to forge a more profound connection between the artful figures and the political figures than would have been possible with other materials. In important ways the choice of wax facilitates and furthers the possibilities of imagistic representation that we have been discussing. Wax is a sculptural material that can be used to accurately model the human figure and simultaneously is connected to practices of writing. Thus it facilitates both visual and literary representative

practices, and *wax magic* proves the best term to capture the many levels on which this magical attack was designed to work. The wax figures are like the political figures not simply because they have similar forms, but also perhaps because they are, metaphorically at least, of the same matter. At the same time, the vulnerability of wax to manipulation, disfiguration, and melting enhances the dangers of magical attacks waged through wax. Thus the best way to understand the "sort of witchcraft" acted on the queen is as wax magic because the term captures the evocative way that wax figures connect to human bodies, hearts, and minds through possibilities of form and materiality which also connect, as we will see, to the possibilities of the early modern stage.[6]

If the best way to understand the attack on the queen is as wax magic, then we should look more carefully at the ways that wax both *models* and *represents* the human in the period, and we should also pay close attention to how various magical practices make use of this connection between waxen matter and the human mind-body complex. Most obviously, wax sculptures connect to human agents because wax is a material that is particularly apt for modeling both the human figure and flesh, as any visitor to Madame Toussaud's can attest. Indeed, wax's suitability for rapid and realistic modeling led artists to use wax models as conceptual aids in the process of sculpting and painting and made wax a popular choice for death masks and effigies throughout early modern Europe. Furthermore, wax's ability to mimic both the appearance and feel of human flesh led to its use in anatomy sculptures during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[7] While wax anatomy sculptures postdate the attack on the queen, the same material qualities of wax that made it a good substitute for corpses in the anatomy classroom during these latter periods also made it a good choice for occult practices that depended on a certain verisimilitude.

The similarity between physical bodies and wax sculptures provides one basis for magical attack, which we can see explicitly in Ralph Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1586). There witches attack King Duffe using a wax simulacrum, much like the ones discovered in the London stable, and after extensive searching these same witches are discovered "rosting upon a woodden broch an image of wax at the fier, resembling in each feature the kings person, made and devised (as is to be thought) by craft and art of the divell" (150).[8] Like the figures discovered in the London stable, the simulacrum is a miniature wax model of the monarch, "resembling in each feature the kings person" (149). Unlike de Mendoza, Holinshed explicitly spells out how the attack wrought on the simulacrum manifests in the sickness of the king:

> . . . for as the image did waste afore the fire, so did the bodie of the king breake foorth in sweat. And as for the words of the inchantment, they served to keepe him still waking from sleepe, so that as the wax ever melted, so did the kings flesh: by the which means it should have come to passe, that when the wax was once cleane consinned, the death of the king should immediatlie follow. (150)

The application of heat to the wax image causes both the wax and the king's body to sweat and that illness lays waste to the king's exterior, "so that as the wax ever melted, so did the kings flesh." Left unchecked, eventually both the image and the king would be "cleane consinned." Holinshed clearly aligns wax image and King and suggests a reciprocal relationship between the two bodies. Like wax, the body of the king is subject to "such decaie and consumption (so as there remained unneth anie thing upon him save skin and bone)" (149). While the shape or image of the figure helps connect it to the specific individual being attacked, wax also metaphorically connects to the body, and the material qualities of wax govern the nature of the attack—since wax melts, the king's flesh does too. In his *Daemonologie* (1597), written two decades after the incident in the London stables, James I provides a similar account of wax magic, explaining that the Devil "teacheth, how to make Pictures of waxe or clay: That by the rosting thereof, the persones that they bear the name of, may be continuallie melted or dryed awaie by continuall sicknesse" (44). Like Holinshed, James suggests that the person wastes away exactly as the simulacrum does and that wax magic has real power to work mischief as the result of a symbolic connection predicated on the similarity between wax and flesh.[9]

Neither James nor Holinshed explicitly extends the impact of wax magic beyond physical illness, yet additional possibilities inhere in wax magic because wax functions as an important model for how specific interior spaces work, suggesting that a person's "waxiness" extends beyond the skin. In "Imprints: Shakespeare, Gutenberg, and Descartes," Margreta de Grazia shows that wax functions as a foundational model of both epistemological and biological reproduction. Specifically, the mind, heart, and the womb are understood as locations that can be imprinted, and are susceptible to manipulation (29–58). The waxiness of heart, mind, and womb metaphorically links those organs to wax figures, even when the wax figures do not explicitly model those bodily locations. Thus it is not surprising that we find discussions of love charms and other will-bending magic in and around descriptions of wax magic. In James's treatise, the discussion of wax magic is interrupted to describe the

range of mischiefs that practitioners can accomplish, including "mak[ing] men and women to love or hate other" (45). While James does not attach such magic to wax, he also does not explain how such manipulation is effected. The wax-like qualities of love and hate make wax magic a viable possibility. The connection becomes more explicit in Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*. Scot describes how practitioners believe that wax figures can be used: "to obteine a womans love, an image must be made in the houre of *Venus*, of virgine wax, in the name of the beloved, whereupon a character is written, & is warmed at a fier, and in dooing thereof the name of some angell must be mentioned" (257). The witchcraft required to make a woman fall in love proceeds along the same terms as that required to waste a king, except here instead of melting the skin it softens the heart. Again, while Scot does not believe such magic possible, his account reveals the belief amongst practitioners, at least, that wax magic could work on a subject's interiority, creating amorous feelings and perhaps also having other effects on a subject's will.

Elizabeth may have been understood as particularly vulnerable to this kind of attack because of her gender. In part because of their reproductive faculties, women were more strongly associated with wax than men, as is clear from both Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Twelfth Night*. In the poem, the narrator excuses Lucrece by rendering gender difference absolute and material. He explains, "for men have marble, women waxen minds; and therefore are they formed as marble will" (1240). In the play, Viola echoes the sentiment when she laments, "How easy is it for the proper false / In women's waxen hearts to set their forms" (2.2.27–28). These two moments show how female minds in particular become aligned with wax and begin to suggest that a female monarch might be particularly vulnerable to magical attacks enacted through wax. We can see the connections between magic, wax, and gender explicitly explored in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There magic is figured, together with poetry, as the means by which Lysander seduces Hermia. Egeus claims:

> This hath bewitched the bosom of my child.
> Thou, thou, Lysander, thou hast given her rhymes,
> And interchanged love tokens with my child.
> Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung
> With feigning voice verses of feigning love,
> And stol'n the impression of her fantasy. (1.1.27–32)

His "verses of feigning love" are imagined to have the power to steal "the impression of her fantasy," a waxy location, like the mind or the heart, and seduction is explicitly figured as a magical attack. While Hermia is not explicitly connected to wax in these lines, a few lines later Theseus suggests that to her father she should be "but as a form in wax, / By him imprinted, and within his power / To leave the figure or disfigure it" (1.1.46–51). Although Hermia's relationship to wax is offered here as an imperative, rather than a reality, she is imagined by both Theseus and Egeus to be like wax, and thus particularly susceptible to pressure from the men in her life. For Lucrece, Viola, Hermia, and Elizabeth, being a woman means being waxier than men, and thus more vulnerable to manipulation, magical or otherwise. Still, as Holinshed's *Chronicle* and James's *Daemonology* make clear, it is not only women who can be worked on by such magic, but also men, or more specifically kings. The difference in susceptibility between genders, if there is a difference, can only be a matter of degree.

Wax magic works on men's interiors as well as women's because even as women are more strongly associated with wax in the cultural imagination, wax also more generally figures what it means to be human. As a material of art, wax is unusual in that its hardness is never permanent. It is always potentially malleable, moldable, and fundamentally erasable. These qualities made wax a popular material both for writing tablets and applications within the visual arts during the early modern period.[10] Yet since wax forms are highly vulnerable to the deforming possibilities of time, they are often not ends in themselves. Instead, as a writing material and a sculptural material, wax is provisional. Wax tablets can be erased and wax models serve as three-dimensional sketches for artists to work out and refine forms that can later be rendered in marble or cast into bronze. The malleability of wax also enables it to model what it means to be human—provisional, striving, vulnerable to deforming forces, but also capable of approaching the perfection of virtuous forms. Wax then, is a material laden with metaphorical potential for representing what it means to be human and is aesthetically apt for exploring the possibilities of human forms—internal and external. If being human is like being a wax sculpture—striving towards perfection, pursuing forms of virtue, but only provisionally—then, just as a sculpture can be remolded and erased, so too, precisely because it is not rigid but malleable, we can be worked on, like a piece of wax.

* * *

Our exploration of wax magic above reveals the power of wax to represent various vulnerabilities of the human body and mind to violence, manipulation, and deception. These same vulnerabilities are targeted in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* when Ferdinand stages a tableaux of wax figures to "bring [his sister] to despair" (4.1.116). Enraged at her secret marriage and her refusal to be ruled by his desires, Ferdinand first captures his sister and then proceeds to psychologically torture her. He arranges to have wax sculptures made of her husband and children as corpses and reveals them to her as the climax of a complicated scene of deception and revelation that begins with a promise of reconciliation. Primed to believe both that Ferdinand is fully capable of performing murder and that he is committed to the truth, the Duchess takes the wax figures to be "true substantial bodies" and is devastated by what she believes to be the corpses of her family (4.1.115). While there are many important differences between Ferdinand's display and the practice of wax magic, including most importantly the victim's level of knowledge about the figures, Ferdinand's spectacle can be understood by reference to wax magic. Like the perpetrator of the wax attack on the queen and her councilors, Ferdinand succeeds in profoundly affecting a sovereign woman through his artful use of wax figures to forge a connection between a subject and object and bring about great harm.[11] At the same time the success of Ferdinand's spectacle, which is not in fact magical in nature, suggests that theater shares in the power of wax magic.

Other critics have noticed the importance of the occult in Ferdinand's spectacle. Katherine Rowe, for example, argues that Ferdinand's use of a dead hand, which he offers in place of his own, relates to folk tales that feature the Hand of Glory. According to these tales, burning a severed felon's hand would allow a witch to move without being seen, either by rendering the witch invisible or causing everyone else to fall into a deep sleep for as long as the hand burned.[12] Albert Tricomi also reads the wax figures in relation to contemporary witchcraft beliefs. He argues both that "Ferdinand's menacing play-acting, with its use of a dead man's hand and wax effigies, is a species of witchcraft" and that the duchess's response to his display is "not literary hyperbole, but a precise, culturally conditioned account of the duchess's subjective experience of witchcraft" (360). Yet in attaching the spectacle to any kind of magical practice, these critics are in the minority. More commonly, critics have been interested in exploring the relation of the wax figures to wax portraiture and wax effigies and suggesting that the wax figures fit into a larger discussion of practices of memorializa-

tion and art in the play.[13] This essay builds on both these possibilities.[14] Like Rowe and Tricomi, I argue that Ferdinand's spectacle must be read in relation to practices of witchcraft, yet I also suggest that wax magic provides a conceptual basis for understanding the way that the relationship between subject and object can become complicated, especially through art.

Simply by deploying wax figures as a means of attack, Ferdinand's tableaux starts to suggest wax magic. After all, while there were many other cultural uses of wax sculpture, only wax magic sets out to do harm. Indeed, his spectacle resembles the attack on the queen in terms of both the number and materiality of the figures, the intention to cause harm, and the dangerous implications of the attack. Ferdinand's use of wax figures is not simply a matter of practicality. Corpses would not serve his purposes equally. Instead, the artful nature of the figures gives them added power and significance and aligns them with the practice of wax magic, even as there are important differences between Ferdinand's figures and the attack waged against the queen.

After displaying the wax figures to the Duchess, Ferdinand revels in his success, telling his henchman Bosola:

> Excellent; as I would wish; she's plagued in art.
> These presentations are but fram'd in wax,
> By the curious master in that quality,
> Vincento Lauriola, and she takes them
> For true substantial bodies. (4.1.111–15)

Ferdinand's speech serves several purposes, including alerting the audience to the exact nature of the display that they have just witnessed along with the duchess. More importantly, for our purposes, Ferdinand's speech reveals his interest in the artful nature of the figures. He delights in the deception and the fact that his sister is "plagued in art." By mentioning the artist's name, he elevates the wax figures from curiosity to art object and underscores the extravagance of his ruse. In order to stage these figures, Ferdinand must have had to go to great length, securing a master craftsman, giving that craftsman time to create the artful corpses, and devising a strategy to present the forms to the duchess in such a way that she would take them to be true. Yet the result seems to be worth the effort, not simply because the duchess despairs, but because her misapprehension of the nature of the corpses is the cause of that despair.[15]

By reveling in the artful nature of the corpses, Ferdinand's speech begins to suggest that the wax figures might be better for his purposes than real corpses

would have been. The deceptive nature of the display affirms his power over his sister, even more than the possession of the corpses would, since he need not actually catch her family and execute them to destroy her. This point may be especially important to Ferdinand, whose entire problem with his sister relates to her decision to remarry and reproduce. By making corpses of wax, he obviates his only possible use for Antonio—as a means of torturing the duchess. Instead, his artfulness, together with the skill of Vincento Lauriola, is sufficient to remake his sister's world and drive her to despair. That the artful corpses provide Ferdinand with tremendous power independent of his access to Antonio and the children also relates to the possibilities of wax magic. As a threat against Elizabeth or any other monarch, wax magic is particularly dangerous since the creation of images and art is available to any and every subject, and such acts of creation are impossible to defend against. Similarly, Ferdinand's deception is dangerous because it is more easily accomplished than gaining access to her husband and family and killing them.

While the wax figures that Ferdinand stages resemble the ones found in the London stable in materiality, number, malicious intent, and danger, they differ from those figures in two important ways. First, they are not intended as part of a magical attack. Indeed, Ferdinand explicitly rejects the possibility of magic earlier in the play. After reporting the rumor that the Duchess has had three bastard children, Ferdinand's henchman, Bosola, suggests that sorcery might have caused the Duchess to "dote on some desertless fellow, / She shames to acknowledge" (3.1.65–66). For Bosola, the duchess's love of a "desertless fellow" is proof that her agency has been compromised, and sorcery seems to him the most likely culprit. When Ferdinand asks him, "Can your faith give way / To think there's power in potions, or in charms, / To make us love whether we will or no?" (3.1.66–68), Bosola replies, "most certainly" (3.1.69). While for Bosola such enchantment seems the most logical explanation for the Duchess's illogical love choices, Ferdinand rejects the possibility outright:

> Away, these are mere gulleries, horrid things
> Invented by some cheating mountebanks
> To abuse us. Do you think that herbs or charms
> Can force the will? Some trials have been made
> In this foolish practice; but the ingredients
> Were lenitive poisons, such as are of force
> To make the patient mad; and straight the witch
> Swears, by equivocation, they are in love. (3.1.70–77)

Ferdinand's rejection of sorcery reveals both his skepticism and careful study of displays of magical prowess. For Ferdinand, magic is a deception, a "mere guller[y]," as he makes clear in his discussion of the "trials" that have been made "in this foolish practice." The witch or "cheating mountebank" deceives by a combination of artfulness and artifice, mixing poisons and lies to fool a susceptible audience. Ferdinand sees that sorcerers, mountebanks, and witches have a real power "to abuse us." Indeed, he seems to have given a great deal of thought as to how practitioners of magic prey on their audiences. He has paid attention to the "trials" that "have been made / In this foolish practice" and thought about what those trials confirmed or failed to confirm about magic. He has also realized that truth is less important than perception.[16]

Like the witch or mountebank who sells love potions, Ferdinand "swears, by equivocation," and his torture of his sister proves that he is a master of deception. Ferdinand not only presents the forms of Antonio and the children as corpses to suggest that they are dead, he also embeds that presentation in a larger performance designed to convince her of their truth and heighten their impact. Before he comes to visit her, Ferdinand relays through Bosola his desire to visit her under the cover of darkness "'cause once he rashly made a solemn vow / Never to see [her] more" (4.1.23–24). This message serves Ferdinand's purpose doubly. First, it allows him to present himself as a man committed to honesty and governed by morality; he cannot break a "solemn vow," however "rashly made" it might be. Second, since she agrees to his request, he gains control over what she can see and how she will experience the wax figures and other aspects of his deception. While he could have simply had Bosola remove the lights, it is important to Ferdinand's plan that she give the light up willingly, both because she is less likely to suspect his nefarious purposes if she seems to have a choice in their removal, and because once she becomes aware of what the darkness has obscured, her consent will serve to increase her horror.

Once he is in her presence, Ferdinand's manipulation of his sister continues. By proffering a dead man's hand in place of his own, he perverts the formal reconciliation that he had offered. As Katherine Rowe has argued, this substitution nullifies the ritual and empties it of meaning (97). It also leaves the duchess more inclined to believe that the wax figures are real, even though the experience challenges her belief in Ferdinand's honest and good intentions. The duchess discovers the nature of the hand slowly, first discovering its coldness, then realizing something is deeply wrong with the hand she is holding. She calls for lights and Ferdinand vacates the stage, leaving the duchess to exclaim to Bosola, "what

witchcraft doth he practice, that he hath left / A dead man's hand here?" (4.1.54–55). While this experience challenges her belief in Ferdinand's honesty and good intention, it simultaneously leaves her more inclined to believe that his next display is true. After all, Ferdinand has revealed himself as the kind of man who deals in flesh, the sort willing to practice "witchcraft." His perversion of the ritual of reconciliation and presentation of the dead hand make him seem capable of anything.[17] By playing with her expectations, manipulating the lighting, and limiting her sensory access to the hand—allowing her to feel it first in the dark, before raising the lights—Ferdinand primes her to believe that his next display, the trio of wax sculptures modeled to look like her family's corpses, consists of "true substantial bodies." When Bosola directs her to "look" at the "the piece from which 'twas ta'en" so that she will "know directly [that Antonio and his children] are dead," she does not question the truth of the figures (4.1.56, 58). Ferdinand masterfully combines deception and revelation to enhance the impact of his torturous display and devastate his sister.[18]

My discussion of Ferdinand's deceptive spectacle also reveals the second major difference between Ferdinand's figures and those discovered in the London stable. Ferdinand's figures depend on the duchess's knowledge and understanding of them in order to work. While this is related to the idea that they are not magic, it is also important to register her awareness. If she does not experience the wax figures herself, they will have no impact on her. Further, presumably a great deal of the impact that they do have on her would be driven by her belief that they are real corpses. On the other hand, simply seeing her loved ones laid out like corpses and knowing that someone with a great deal of power wants to make that fantasy a reality—might be sufficient to move her to despair. Indeed, Lynn Enterline and Brian Chalk both suggest that this may be exactly what happens in the play, taking the duchess's response to the wax figures as evidence that she might understand their true nature.[19] When first confronted with the tableaux, the duchess exclaims:

> There is not between heaven and earth one wish
> I stay for after this. It wastes me more
> Than were't my picture, fashion'd out of wax,
> Stuck with a magical needle, and then buried
> In some foul dunghill; (4.1.62–65)

Since she invokes wax magic to understand the impact of the wax figures, it may be that she knows the figures she looks upon are wax. However, given the

duchess's relief at Bosola's revelation, later in the same Act, that Antonio still lives, it seems more likely that she refers to wax magic not because she understands that the corpses are merely wax figures, but rather because without knowing the true nature of the figures, the duchess intuitively knows that this is a wax matter, something best conceptualized through the possibilities of wax materiality. Indeed, wax magic seems to serve as a conceptual upper bound for the duchess. For her it represents the most extreme attack on a person's psyche and agency that does not result in death, or at least it did prior to Ferdinand's spectacle. The sight of the wax corpses drives her beyond that limit. His figures "waste [her] more" than any magical attack could, more than she can conceive without reference to wax magic or articulate through language other than analogy.

The duchess's comparison between the impact of these figures and that of wax magic raises the question again of how Ferdinand's wax figures might be like those employed in witchcraft. When malevolent wax magic is performed, a wax image of the intended target is abused and buried; and because the wax figure connects to a particular person in various ways, whatever is done to the icon also impacts the subject. Ferdinand, of course, does not show the duchess an image of her own wax corpse, nor for that matter do we have any reason to believe that he has a wax image of her pierced with needles and buried in a dunghill. Still, the wax corpses do have a similar relation to herself as the imagined "picture, fashion'd out of wax"—they represent her and connect to her through the bonds of flesh and family. Indeed, her family is, perhaps, more her "picture" than her own image is and for this reason more able to affect her. Certainly, the effect of seeing the figures is sudden, dramatic, and devastatingly destructive, and her reaction to this presentation reveals the duchess as vulnerable to outside attack and manipulation through her affective bonds to other subjects, especially once those subjects are reduced to objects. Her turn to wax magic to understand the way the wax figures work on her also suggests that the figures could work on her through the power of likeness or sympathy. As Enterline argues, "It is as though she has an unconscious intuition of becoming like what she sees—and perishing for it" (271).[20] Since her family is important to the duchess's self-identity, their forms of death might become her form just as her portrait "stuck with a magical needle, and then buried / In some foul dunghill" might cause her to waste away.

If Ferdinand's wax figures are like magical figures to the extent that they offer a kind of portrait of the self that can be manipulated, the duchess is like

Elizabeth in her vulnerability to such manipulation. This vulnerability can be understood as a kind of waxiness, especially since the play repeatedly deals in material metaphors to describe the duchess. In fact, just before revealing the wax figures, Ferdinand suggests that the duchess's heart is waxy when he tells her to " bury the print" of the hand that she has just kissed in her heart. While he does not explicitly mention wax, the combination of "bury" and "print" suggest that her heart is soft and retentive like wax, especially since this print is supposed to testify that he has "seal[ed] his peace with her," which is to say, the print is supposed to transform her heart into a legible text. If Ferdinand is suggesting that the duchess's heart is like wax, he may be associating waxiness with femininity, which, as discussed above, was a widespread connection made in early modern culture.

Yet Webster's play does not align wax with women to the same extent that Shakespeare does in works like *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Webster never explicitly connects softness to femininity, nor does he suggest that softness is a negative quality. After all, when the duchess woos Antonio, she insists that she is "not the figure cut in alabaster / Kneels at my husbands tomb" (1.1.444–45). By refusing alabaster and the hardness and immobility it offers, the duchess seems to be articulating a vision of womanhood and humanity that depends on elasticity and finds power in softness and flexibility. If this is the case, then the same softness that renders her vulnerable to Ferdinand's attack also allows her to love and live, which suggests that her waxiness may attach as much to her humanity as it does to her gender. Still, the duchess's susceptibility to this attack speaks of her vulnerability, a vulnerability belied by her political position. As a sovereign ruler, the duchess should not be subject to anyone: her power depends on the fiction that she is invulnerable to attack, and part of the transgressiveness of both Ferdinand's spectacle and the wax attack against Elizabeth is that they shatter that fiction.

Whether her vulnerability is the result of her gender or her humanity, the wax figures impact the duchess profoundly and drive her to the very "despair" that motivates the spectacle in the first place. Believing her family to be dead, the duchess loses, at least temporarily, her will to live. She suggests to Bosola, Ferdinand's henchman, that it would be a mercy "if they would bind me to that lifeless trunk, / And let me freeze to death" (4.1.68–69). Here the "lifeless trunk" refers doubly to Antonio's corpse and also their dead legacy, their truncated family tree. She wants to be bound to those forms and also to die, as "the greatest torture souls feel in hell / In hell that they must live, and cannot die"

(4.1.70–71). Over the course of several speeches the duchess continues this line of thought, fantasizing first about emulating the famous Roman example of Portia and killing herself by consuming live coals and then, when Bosola admonishes her about the ethics of suicide, about starving herself to death since "the church enjoins fasting" (4.1.72, 75–76). Bosola recognizes the suicidal fantasies for what they are, exclaiming, "O fie! Despair?" (4.1.74–75). He exhorts her to "leave this vain sorrow. / Things being at the worst begin to mend" (4.1.76–77). However, the duchess rejects the possibilities of recovery implicit in his speech. She exclaims:

> Good comfortable fellow,
> Persuade a wretch that's broke upon the wheel
> To have all his bones new set; entreat him live
> To be executed again. Who must dispatch me?
> I account this world a tedious theatre,
> For I do play a part in't 'gainst my will. (4.1.80–85)

Her metaphor makes clear both the extent to which Ferdinand's display has wrecked her and her rationale for preferring death to life. By comparing herself to "a wretch that's broke upon the wheel" she suggests that her internal pain is tantamount to the most extreme physical torture. Being broken on a wheel was a form of execution in which the prisoner was bound to a wheel and then bludgeoned so that every bone was broken in multiple places and the body was severely mangled.[21] By referencing this form of torture, the duchess conveys both the extent of her pain and the impossibility of healing the damage that the torture has caused.[22] It would be impossible to set all of the bones of a body damaged to such an extent; and even if it were possible, the physical pain would continue to be unbearable. After sustaining that amount of damage, nobody would desire to continue to live, especially if one were to live just "[t]o be executed again." The duchess is suggesting that the same promise of continuous torture is hers for as long as she remains alive. Stripped of her political power, deprived of her family, and held captive by her brother, the duchess knows that she is powerless and that things cannot "mend." If she continues to live, it will be to "play a part . . . 'gainst [her] will," while being crippled by grief. Since Ferdinand's torturous spectacle has already taught her the pain of such playing, her preference for death is unsurprising.[23]

Later in the act, the duchess and her maid, Cariola, discuss the impact of Ferdinand's display in terms that both further illuminate the extent of the

damage caused by Ferdinand's tableaux and the power of art as a conceptual tool for understanding that damage. The duchess tells Cariola:

> I am not mad yet, to my cause of sorrow:
> Th' heaven o'er my head seems made of molten brass,
> The earth of flaming sulphur, yet I am not mad.
> I am acquainted with sad misery,
> As the tann'd galley-slave is with his oar;
> Necessity makes me suffer constantly,
> And custom makes it easy. Whom do I look like now? (4.2.24–30)

The duchess's perception of the world has changed dramatically, to the extent that she seems to move through a landscape of "flaming sulphur" and "molten brass." Her world has become a world of flames, a hell on earth. Yet despite the constant torture, she is "not mad," as she insists not once but twice in this speech. Madness might offer relief, but instead the only relief she seems able to find is in the constancy of the suffering. She is "acquainted with sad misery" and "custom makes it easy." The purpose of the speech seems to be to convey to both Cariola and the audience as a whole the exact extent of the damage that Ferdinand's display has wrought. However, it also functions as another consideration of the relationship between subjective reality and objective reality. The duchess knows that "th' heaven o'er [her] head" only "*seems* made of molten brass" [emphasis added]. She also knows that nobody shares that experience. Yet the reality of that suffering is such that she believes it should have real physical effects on the world, if on nothing else than on her own appearance. The "tann'd galley-slave," after all, is darkened by his contact with the sun.

Cariola's response fails to fully resolve the question of how the duchess's inner state has impacted her appearance. However, she suggests that art is the best way to understand the duchess's current state. Cariola tells the duchess that she looks:

> Like to your picture in the gallery,
> A deal of life in show, but none in practice;
> Or rather like some reverend monument
> Whose ruins are even pitied. (4.2.31–34)

The first of these comparisons simultaneously suggests that the duchess's appearance is static and that something has drastically changed. If the duchess looks like her picture, which has been painted to look like her, then she must

also still look like herself. However, Cariola inverts the chain of resemblance so that the duchess resembles her portrait instead of the portrait resembling her. The subject resembles the object rather than the reverse. As Cariola goes on to explain, the duchess, like her picture, now possesses "a deal of life in show, but none in practice." While people can live and die, art can only represent such states. It is always "show," not "practice." Thus she is suggesting that what has changed is not the duchess's appearance, but the relationship of that appearance to her reality. The disjuncture between the appearance of life or death and their reality is intrinsic to art. Thus if Cariola is right that the effect of Ferdinand's display has been to make the duchess more like her portrait, then the spectacle also has made the duchess more like the forms she viewed. After all, while the wax corpses of the duchess's family appear dead, they are exactly as close to death as her portrait is to life.

Yet Cariola does not end with this comparison. She immediately follows up the portrait analogy with the second analogy in which she compares the duchess to "some reverend monument / Whose ruins are even pitied" (4.2.33–34). This second analogy both extends and revises the first. Again, Cariola insists that the duchess has become like an art object. By shifting the comparison from a portrait to a sculpture, she brings the analogy even closer to Ferdinand's wax sculptures. Yet the move from portrait to ruined sculpture also reintroduces the possibility that Ferdinand's display has physically marked her. The duchess is not simply like art; she is like ruined art. A monument in ruins still reveals hints of what used to be, but it no longer seems live or dead so much as it threatens to become nothing and dissolve into incoherence. Since monuments typically depict important figures who have died, as a form of art the ruined monument suggests both the possibility of memorialization after death and the impermanence of that memorialization. Art is not as static as it seemed in the first comparison. Instead, it is vulnerable to the same ravages of time that bodies are. This second analogy both reinforces the duchess's connection to art and makes clear that nothing about that similarity protects her. If she has become like art, she has become an object to be "pitied," broken, manipulated, or interpreted as any subject sees fit. Together the two analogies further the duchess's suggestion that the impact of Ferdinand's figures is like wax magic. Seeing the wax figures of the corpses has made the duchess more like those forms by making her more like an art object, or perhaps more aptly, a ruined art object. Her sympathetic identification with those figures gives them the power to transform her from sovereign to subject and from subject to object.

When Cariola tells the duchess that she looks like a "reverend monument, whose ruins are even pitied," she offers a vision of exactly how successful Ferdinand's attack has been. He has not only transformed the duchess from subject to object and driven her to despair. He also has forced her to adopt a position that she explicitly rejected earlier in the play, that of "the figure carved in alabaster [who] kneels at [her] husband's tomb."[24] The alabaster funeral sculpture represents an ideal form of widowhood, a frozen posture of grief that constrains a woman's identity in reference to her husband. The duchess must reject that posture in order to marry Antonio. If Cariola's analogy is apt, Ferdinand's torture has managed to transform her into the same kind of frozen form. On the one hand, this transformation reveals the success of Ferdinand's project—after all, his torturous spectacle is motivated by his disapproval of her secret marriage and family, which are the forms she chooses over the idealized form of widowhood. Thus, insofar as his display makes her more like the statue, his methods return her to a previous, more acceptable version of herself. At the same time, that transformation has given her a certain hardness and strength. While she can still be harmed, she is no longer as malleable as she once was. Ferdinand surrounds her with the denizens of the local madhouse, intending that their madness will infect her, yet it proves not to be catching. Similarly, the form of her death, which according to Bosola "should much afflict [her]," does not (4.2.206). The duchess exclaims, "What would it pleasure me to have my throat cut / with diamonds? Or to be smothered / with cassia? Or to be shot to death with pearls?" (4.2.208–210). The wax figures seem to have inured her to further attacks, especially those of a psychological nature. Indeed, after being surrounded by madmen, the duchess tells Cariola that "nothing but noise and folly / Can keep [her] in [her] right wits; whereas reason / And silence make [her] stark mad" (4.2.5-7). Everything that transpires after seeing the figures, including her own execution, amounts to mere "noise and folly." If wax magic represented her previous conceptual limit for how one subject could waste another, the wax figures have taken their place and only continuing to contemplate them could drive her from despair to madness.

Ferdinand's spectacle and its relationship to wax magic also provide a conceptual basis to understand the power of the duchess's own corpse later in the Act. After the duchess has been executed, Ferdinand comes to see the results of his own handiwork; and Bosola, upset by what he has been made to do, insists that Ferdinand look at the corpse, telling him, "fix your eye here" (4.2.252). Ferdinand's response, "constantly," begins to reveal how deeply the sight moves

him (4.2.252). While Ferdinand's next speech is a command to "cover her face" (4.2.256), he seems to continue to look on the image of her dead corpse within his mind, even at the expense of his own sanity. He is unable to externally or internally look away. Just as his wax corpses profoundly impacted the duchess, her corpse profoundly moves him because he cannot separate himself from her. The wax figures impact the duchess in part because they represent her identity as mother and wife, and thus serve as her double; now she performs the same function for Ferdinand. While gazing on her dead body, he reveals that, "she and I were twins; / And should I die this instant, I had lived/ Her time to a minute" (4.2.259–260). The duchess's corpse functions like a mirror for Ferdinand, and looking on that corpse fractures his sense of identity.

While he does not follow her immediately to death as he imagines here, he does descend into madness; and the symptoms of his madness further reveal his confusion regarding the limits of his identity. When we next see Ferdinand he has been diagnosed with lycanthropia, a disease that causes those "possessed with't [to] . . . / . . . imagine / Themselves to be transformed into wolves" (5.2.8–10). Ferdinand's identification as a wolf dramatizes the degree to which his project against his sister has destroyed him. Although as audience we only hear about his wolflike exploits, killing his sister seems to have killed his humanity. Even more telling is his attempt to rid himself of his shadow. He asks Malateste, one of his courtiers, to "stay [the shadow], let it not haunt me" and then attempts to "throttle it" himself. The shadow reveals his confusion over where his own identity ends, a confusion that seems caught up with his relation to his sister throughout the play and that motivates his extreme actions against her. It is a confusion that he never resolves. He dies blaming the duchess for his fate and simultaneously claiming her as part of himself, "My sister! O my sister! There's the cause on't: / Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, / Like diamonds we are cut by our own dust" (5.5.70–73). The link between Ferdinand and his sister is a link established by blood and psychology, not by art or wax. Yet the way wax figures work on the duchess helps make visible the vulnerability of subjects to such bonds, enabling us to understand how the duchess's corpse might waste her brother and why he might be confused about the limits of his own subjectivity.[25]

* * *

As spectators, we are worked on by both Ferdinand's spectacle and Webster's play. Our relationship to the truth of the figures is ultimately different than the

duchess's, but we are still impacted both by their initial display, and by the duchess's continued response to that display. At first the impact of the figures on the audience would be heightened by our ignorance of their status as art within the world of the play. Critics have raised various theories about how the wax figures might have been staged in the seventeenth century. Some have suggested, for example, that the figures might have actually been made of wax by the same sculptor who made the funereal sculptures for Prince Henry.[26] Yet the more plausible theory seems to be that the wax sculptures would have been played by actors in exactly the same way that corpses would have been. Thus when the duchess initially sees the figures and identifies them as corpses it is likely that we would take our cue from her, believing with her that the figures are offered as proof that Antonio and her children are dead. As the duchess mourns her family, a sympathetic audience would be moved to pity, impacted both by the sight of corpses and by the duchess's displays of grief.[27]

Eventually, however, as David Bergeron puts it, "Webster . . . widens the ironic gap" (335); when Ferdinand brags to Bosola about the effect of his art, the audience is informed of the nature of the figures, while the duchess is left uninformed. This gap between our knowledge and hers invites the audience to contemplate the nature of the spectacle and its relationship to theater. As Huston Diehl argues, the effect is to shift our attention from spectacle to spectator and force us to consider our own vulnerability to the workings of the stage.[28] While the audience may not have known the exact nature of Ferdinand's artful figures, we should always have known, or at least assumed, that all of the action on the stage was fictional because we were at a play. Yet have we? To the extent that we sympathize with the plights of characters and mourn their deaths, we collapse together the actors playing and the characters being played, repeatedly forgetting that we are watching fiction. Indeed, moments when playwrights draw attention to the artificiality of their spectacle are noteworthy precisely because they rupture the illusion created on stage. When, one scene later, Bosola demands that Ferdinand look on his own spectacle of bodies, consisting of the duchess and her strangled children, we mourn their deaths and feel the "pity" that Bosola calls for, even though on a metatheatrical level these corpses are the same as the wax figures of the previous scene (4.2.248). Artful corpses and actual corpses require the same material: living bodies posed as dead.[29]

This repetition of corpses and spectacles suggests that art has the power to plague even when we should know the difference between fiction and reality, since as an audience we are again moved by the presentation of bodies, even

though we have just been reminded of the artificiality of the stage. Just as wax magic relies on the power of sympathy to work profound change on the targeted subject, so too does the stage. Ferdinand thinks the power of his art is its ability to deceive—and to a certain extent he may be right—but there is power beyond simple deception that inheres in the display, regardless of whether anyone is deceived by it.[30] That power lies in its ability to connect with, move, and influence its intended target, which is also the power of both wax magic and the stage.[31]

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the relationship between philosophy and magic in the period, see Ernst Cassirer.

2. Sir Kenelm Digby's sympathy powders are a famous example of sympathetic magic. See Seth Lobis.

3. Other forms of magic were considered acceptable. *Magic* often belonged to the aristocratic elite, while *witchcraft* was associated more strongly with the poor, although the class divide is not rigorously maintained. *Goodwives* in villages were also understood to use magic in their cures and were not condemned as witches. See Bever 1–4 and Sharpe 37–42 and 66–70.

4. *Sinister* derives from the Latin "sinister," which literally means "left" or "left-handed." In English the adjective more typically suggests "given with intent to deceive or mislead" or "dishonest, unfair, not straightforward, underhand; dark." However, it continues to hold both possibilities (*OED* s.v. *sinister*). Using the left hand to perform work normally performed by the right hand was a practice associated with witchcraft in the period as can be seen by Ben Jonson's insistence in the *Masque of Queens* that the witches' dance be "full of preposterous change, and gesticulation" and that they "mak[e] theyr circles backward, to the left hand" (Jonson lines 344–50). See also Clark 13–15.

5. See Montrose, especially 111–12.

6. Both image magic and wax magic could be placed within a larger category of sympathetic magic, wherein magical attacks exploit the natural sympathies inherent in matter to work across a distance. See Lobis 243–46 and Clark 271–75.

7. See Harvey 96–102 for a fuller discussion of the use of wax in seventeenth-century Italy. See Newman for a fascinating discussion of eighteenth-century wax anatomical models and questions of gender.

8. I/J and u/v have been normalized in this quotation and in other primary source quotations.

9. In the early 1590s several witches were accused of performing wax magic against James, and these attacks may have formed the basis for his engagement with the subject. See Sharpe 47–49 for a discussion of James I's motivations for writing *Daemonologie*.

10. For a discussion on wax tablets in early modern England, see Stallybrass, Chartier, Mowery, and Wolfe, "Hamlet's Tables," especially 383–85. While these authors suggest that the use of wax tablets was on the decline, they insist on the importance of erasable notebooks as a replacement for those tablets, suggesting that "waxiness" was an important characteristic even as the material itself proved too expensive for continued use.

11. While the magical attack on the queen was most likely not efficacious as such, the discovery of the wax figures certainly had political and cultural effects. Moreover, though we may employ a materialist skepticism about the efficacy of magic, there is no way to be certain that the magical attack itself was unsuccessful.

12. See Rowe 97–104.

13. Michael Neill, David Bergeron ("The Wax Figures in *The Duchess of Malfi*"), and Margaret Owens are among the critics who suggest that the best way to understand the wax figures is in reference to a thematics of memorialization. They each place the figures in the context of wax portraiture and funereal sculptures.

14. There is an earlier group of scholars who argued that the wax figures do not serve a serious dramatic purpose. See, for example, Ekeblad 254.

15. In this discussion of despair, I have in mind despair as a kind of spiritual death. Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* discusses despair in this context (see, for example, Burton 693).

16. Despite Ferdinand's rejection of magic, the play as a whole is more ambivalent, leaving open the possibility of the supernatural. Tricomi suggests the play demonstrates "the consequences of living in a world where the possibilities of spiritual intervention and demonic possession are continually in play" (346). See also 345–72.

17. Presumably, on a Jacobean stage the dead hand would have been a prop of some kind, made of wax or some other material. Even within the fiction of the play it is not clear that Ferdinand actually offers his sister a severed limb. Yet the physical reality of the hand does not matter as much as the psychological perception of it as real.

18. For further discussion of Ferdinand's torture of his sister, see Hillary Nunn 93–96. Huston Diehl also attaches Ferdinand's scene of torture to theatrical possibilities, see 182–85.

19. Enterline (see 271) draws attention to the ambiguity in the Duchess's understanding of the figures. Chalk also suggests that it is "not clear the Duchess is taken in by Ferdinand's device" (394) but unlike Enterline goes on to assume that she has not been fooled. Chalk claims, "even when shocked, the Duchess seems perfectly capable of distinguishing between the dead and 'pictures fashion'd out of wax' "(394).

20. In her reading of this scene, Enterline also suggests that Webster may be "attempt[ing] to invoke a blind transference of sympathetic, magical power in her 'direct' reaction to the theatrical tableau" (271).

21. See Kellaway 56.

22. Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* theorizes the relationship between language and physical pain. Scarry suggests that "whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures that unsharability through its resistance to language" (4). The duchess's response suggests that mental pain could be theorized in similar terms. To describe her mental anguish the duchess must resort to a series of metaphors, none of which prove sufficient alone.

23. A significant aspect of Ferdinand's torture is that he tricks the duchess into actively participating in it. She accepts the offered hand and kisses it. For further discussion on the duchess's active participation, see Nunn 94.

24. For a further discussion of the alabaster funereal sculpture, see Neill 338–41.

25. Enterline discusses Ferdinand's relationship to his sister in similar terms. See 281–83.

26. See Neill 339 and Bergeron, "The Restoration of Hermione," 132.

27. A modern production could play with the obviousness of the materiality of the corpses through makeup, use of props, or actors, changing the audience's relationship to Ferdinand's spectacle.

28. See Diehl, especially 185.

29. Even if the wax corpses are actually pieces of sculpture on the stage, it is still an analogous moment; the substitutions of actors for characters and live bodies for dead participate in the same network as the substitution of wax icon for corpse.

30. Presumably, if the duchess knew that the corpses of her family were fake, she would still be moved. She would see the corpses as prefigurations of what would be and read them as wax magic, as witchcraft with the power to waste her family and through them herself. Her knowledge, or lack of knowledge, about the authenticity of the wax figures would have little impact on her reaction to them.

31. Ferdinand's desire to "plague[] in art" seems to anticipate Antonin Artaud in *The Theater and Its Double*, where he posits, "if the theater is like the plague, it is not only because it affects important collectivities and upsets them in an identical way. In the theater as in the plague there is something both victorious and vengeful" (27). Artaud's theater of cruelty, like Ferdinand's, works on its audience in ways that are beyond rational comprehension.

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